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AUTHOR	Coleman, Mary Ruth
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ABSTRACT

This digest briefly discusses the identification of students who are gifted, difficulties in the identification process, appropriate identification practices, and procedures that can help with identification. First, it stresses that identification must be the means to securing appropriate services for the student, not an end in itself. The paper then identifies common problems in the identification process including: (1) disproportionate representation; (2) disregard for varied and practical methods of identifying intelligence, including student portfolios, work over time, performance based assessment, all of which can supplement standardized testing; (3) inappropriate use of statistical formulas such as "cut scores"; and (4) a mismatch between identification and services. Next, some appropriate identification practices are highlighted, noting that the best practices rely on multiple criteria involving multiple types of information, multiple sources of information, and multiple time periods. The paper then goes on to explain three phases or steps in the identification process: first, general screening or student search; second, review of students for eligibility; and third, services and options matches. The paper concludes that the identification process itself should be periodically reviewed to ensure its validity. Such a review would involve collecting data on student referrals, eligibility decisions, and placement decisions with data disaggregated by grade, gender, ethnicity, language background, and economic status. (DB)

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By
Mary R. Coleman

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The Identification of Students Who are Gifted

Mary Ruth Coleman

Few areas in the education of children with exceptionalities are as controversial and critical as appropriate identification of children who are gifted. The controversies involve all the pros and cons of labeling children as well as a variety of political issues. Yet, identification remains critical to ensuring that children receive the services they need to thrive in school. This digest discusses the identification of students who are gifted, the difficulties in the identification process, appropriate identification practices, and procedures that can help with identification.

Identification: A Means Not an End

School systems often face difficult decisions when developing procedures for identification. The amount of money allotted to gifted education must include both identification and programming, while providing a balance between the two. School system administrators run the risk of using more energy, resources, and precision planning in the identification process than in the services provided once a student is identified. Some states even require identification but do not require the provision of services (Coleman & Gallagher, 1995). With limited funding, schools must make tradeoffs between using individual assessments of children and using good group measures. Ideally, information gleaned during identification would be used to guide curriculum and instruction for each child. In any case, identification must be the means to securing appropriate services to meet the needs of the student, not an end in itself.

Problems We Face in the Identification Process

To be appropriate, the identification process must accurately find the students. It must neither overlook students who need services nor identify students who do not. This is not easy. Historically, the identification of gifted students has been plagued with the following dilemmas that must be addressed.

- ***Disproportionate Representation***. Children from culturally/linguistically diverse and/or economically disadvantaged families and gifted children with disabilities have been dramatically underrepresented in programs for gifted students (Castellano, 2003; National Research Council, 2002). The reasons are complex and include an overreliance on standardized tests, narrow conceptions of intelligence and the resulting definitions of giftedness, and the procedures and policies that guide local and state gifted programs. A child's pre-school experiences and the nature of early classroom experiences are probably just as important because they set the stage for later academic success. No amount of effort has thusfar produced a successful long-term solution; despite decades of efforts, the underrepresentation dilemma persists.
- ***Disregard for Theoretical Knowledge of Intelligence.*** Intelligence is multifaceted, developmental, and dynamic and can either be inhibited or enhanced by experiences. When we rely on the use of a single criterion such as an IQ score to act as a gatekeeper or rely on theories with little empirical grounding, our identification practices do not reflect this understanding of intelligence (Coleman, 2000; Perkins, 1995). There are many practical ways of discovering what students know and what they are able to do. Student portfolios, showing work over time; performance-based assessments; and projects that involve collaboration with peers can all supplement standardized testing. These methods also respect a multidimensional view of giftedness and intelligence (Callahan, Tomlinson, Hunsaker, Bland, & Moon, 1995).
- ***Inappropriate Use of Statistical Formulas.*** When identification procedures require the use of "cut scores" and/or formulas that combine scores from a variety of measures into a single score (i.e., an IQ score combined with an achievement score and a performance score from a checklist), we violate sound statistical methods and the data are no longer valid (Frasier, 1997).
- ***Mismatch between Identification and Services.*** To be useful the data collected during the identification process must be matched to the types of services we can provide and must inform our educational decisions for the student. For example, if we are serving students in an advanced math program the identification should focus on mathematical abilities, performance, and/or interest. Problems arise when we do not have a good match between identification instruments and the services we provide. For example, when we rely solely on visual-spatial measures to identify children for gifted programs and then provide services that are highly verbal, we may do these students more harm than good. The system works best when the identification process assesses a variety of abilities, and when a variety of services are available so that optimal matches can be made.

Appropriate Identification Practices

The best identification practices rely on multiple criteria to look for students with gifts and talents. Multiple criteria involve:

- multiple types of information (e.g., indicators of student's cognitive abilities, academic achievement, performance in a variety of settings, interests, creativity, motivation; and learning characteristics/behaviors);
- multiple sources of information (e.g., test scores, school grades, and comments by classroom teachers, specialty area teachers, counselors, parents, peers, and the students themselves); and
- multiple time periods to ensure that students are not missed by "one shot" identification procedures that often take place at the end of second or third grade.

We must also ensure that standardized measures used normative samples appropriate to the students being tested, taking into account factors such as ethnicity, language, or the presence of a disability.

The use of multiple criteria does not mean the creation of multiple hurdles to jump in order to be identified as gifted. We need to look for students with outstanding potential in a variety of ways and at a variety of time periods to ensure that no child who needs services provided through gifted education is missed. Data collected through the use of multiple criteria give us indicators of a student's need for services. These

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indicators often vary in strength and may differ according to specific domains being measured. For example, a student may be gifted in math but not gifted in reading and spelling and because of this, it is inappropriate to sum or combine the information. When used appropriately, no single criterion should prevent a student's identification as gifted; however, any single criterion, if strong enough, can indicate a need for services.

The Association for the Gifted (TAG) refers to the identification process as searching for "hints and clues" of giftedness in all of our students (CEC, 2001). This means that we must learn to recognize the indicators of potential that our students show us and that we must nurture this potential when we see it. To find students who have historically been overlooked and underserved by gifted education we must be proactive in searching for abilities that can be masked or hidden (National Research Council, 2002). We may need to include planned experiences that are specifically designed to give students an opportunity to show their abilities in safe environments; we may also need to establish programs that will give children of promise developmental opportunities that will prepare them to profit from academically demanding programs. We may also need to provide specific supports and professional development to teachers to help them recognize and nurture students with outstanding potential who have been historically missed in our identification processes (National Research Council, 2002).

Steps in the Identification Process

The identification process must be dynamic with both formal identification checkpoints and ongoing opportunities for students to be identified as their needs are recognized. The three phases in this process are

1. ***General Screening or Student Search:*** The purpose of this phase is to establish a pool of students who might qualify for services, ensuring that no student falls through the cracks. This process involves formal designated times at which the total school population or all students in a designated grade level are reviewed, including students whose primary language is not English and students with disabilities. Screening methods can rely on student data that are readily available for all students (e.g., standardized scores taken for state or district assessments) and/or may involve specific cognitive and academic assessments given as part of the screening process. Comprehensive screening also includes invitations to teachers, parents, and students to suggest names of individuals who might need services. The screening procedures must not be more stringent than the identification procedures. In other words, the screening pool should be larger than the actual identification pool. Screening should also be ongoing to allow for identification throughout the school year. All students recognized in this phase move to the next phase in the identification process.
2. ***Review of Students for Eligibility.*** The purpose of this phase is to review the students, determining which students would benefit from formal identification and services. At this phase all the data are reviewed to look for indicators that show a need for services. A given student may be designated as clearly needing or not needing gifted services, as potentially eligible at a later review, or as tentatively placed to see whether the available services are a good match. It may also be determined that a student is gifted in an area not served by the school. In the decision-making process it is essential to remember that no single piece of evidence should disqualify a student, but any single piece of evidence that is strong enough can reveal a need for services.
3. ***Services Options Match.*** A school or school system needs first to survey the possibilities it can offer students, both in regular classrooms and special classrooms, so that it can set the stage for planning optimal matches of students and options. Included for consideration should, for example, be differentiated experiences in the regular classroom, various methods of acceleration, cluster grouping, pull-out and self-contained special classes, independent study, and so on. Based on a comprehensive review of the student's strengths and needs, the best match for services can then be made. This process is straightforward when the needs of the student and the options for meeting these needs are clear-cut. It can, however, require more thought and planning for those gifted students whose needs are either different and/or are more complex. Students whose first language is not English, students who also have a disability, and students whose past experiences may not have prepared them for advanced academic challenges may need special consideration in the configuration of their services (Castellano, 2003; Coleman, 2001). Highly gifted students will need different options than mildly or moderately gifted students. In all cases the appropriateness of the service match should be monitored and reviewed periodically to make sure it is still a good fit for the student.

Conclusions

The identification process itself should be periodically reviewed to make sure that it is valid for the population being served and the types of services being provided. To facilitate this review, data on student referrals, eligibility decisions, and placement decisions should be collected. To help the district examine identification trends for historically under-represented students the data must be disaggregated by grade, gender, ethnicity, language background, and economic status. These data should reflect patterns across the districts by schools and teachers. The identification process is a first but critical step in the process of ensuring that students who need gifted education are recognized and matched with appropriate services so that they can thrive in school.

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